The American Indian Wars:
Noncommissioned Officer Corps Evolution at a Gallop

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27 February 2003

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The American Indian Wars of the late 1800's presented the Army with a relatively new challenge. This challenge, the employment of forces in what today we would largely classify as a Peacetime Military Engagement activity, was complicated by the U.S. Army's post-Civil War drawdown (FM3.0, 4). The Army's solution was a return to the regional defense or fort framework system used prior to the Civil War and also introduced a doctrinal shift of then present day combat strategies in which cavalry forces bore the blunt of the mission taskings in the western United States (Matloff, 305). This solution, enacted during a pivotal time period of American military history, also had the by-product effect of serving as the primary catalyst for enlarging the scope and duties of the Army's Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Corps. This body of work briefly examines the resultant outcome of this solution and its strategies and their far-reaching and profound impact on the evolution of the NCO Corps.

After the American Civil War, the U.S. initially continued to maintain a large standing army in order to facilitate reconstruction and security efforts in the south. By 1867, the army reduced its strength from the wartime million-plus roll to roughly 57,000 troops due to both financial and political constraints. Over the next ten years the drawdown continued with a rough yearly average of 27,000 soldiers in uniform during this period (Matloff, 301). When considering the army's widening mission creep and expansive area of operations in the West during the Indian Wars (which will be addressed in detail later in this article), maintaining a larger standing force would have seemed more prudent.

However, the profitable use of volunteers during the Civil War gave way to the fiscal realities of post-war America. In addition, the political climate and public opinion maintained that the country was indeed no longer at war and thus did not require a large peacetime force (Matloff, 301 and Gurney, 278). Even today we might maintain the same perspective. Hence, the author's contention within the framework of the Army's Field Manual 3.0, Operations, that most students of military history would classify the American Indian Wars as a peacetime military engagement activity rather than war.

The continued westward expansion by the nation's civilian populace, coupled with a belligerent indigenous pseudo-occupying force represented by the various Indian Nations, posed a tough dilemma for the now lean U.S. Army. Largely, how to balance the increased civil-military and combat patrol requirements and responsibilities over thousands of square miles in diverse and often hostile environmental conditions by applying limited military assets. No short-term solution would do, civil-military responsibilities such as Indian treaty enforcement and escort duty for both railroad and telegraph construction efforts were not tied to a time period oriented decision cycle (Fisch, 70). The hit-and-run or guerilla warfare tactics employed by the Indians; that in today's military parlance fall within the low intensity conflict spectrum, also complicated the Army's scouting and combat patrol requirements in the west. Essentially, the Indians used tactics that the post-Civil War Army was ill prepared to deal with – especially at the small unit level (Gurney, 266).

The Army's solution of returning to a regional defense system was also complicated by the need to man more, albeit smaller garrisons west of the Mississippi. These garrisons, often consisting of lonely detachments of two or three companies, were

widely scattered and minimally staffed, especially with regard to their commissioned officer complement (Josephly, 7). The relative isolation of the various posts, and the capabilities of an opposing force of which we often refer to as the finest light cavalry in the world, placed a high premium on the forced reliance of mounted patrols to make this doctrinal shift and its strategies work. The Army had always maintained a cavalry force – though now its numbers or ratio to light infantry was higher - with an increased emphasis for these company and even platoon sized-units to be capable of independent and decisive action (Fisch, 70). In essence, these forces were designed to function as light infantry - trained, equipped, and prepared to fight at the small unit level either on horseback or dismounted after conducting pursuit operations.

The Army's strategy of numerous, small, and relatively mobile units had its most telling impact on the NCO Corps. The relative isolation of these far-flung posts contributed to potentially high desertion and alcoholism rates (Urwin, 146). Increased professionalism by the NCOs assigned was quite often the primary mechanism that kept many of these tiny garrisons both orderly and productive. The creation of several key duty positions, perhaps fueled by the need for more lower-level staff oversight – particularly in the Army's western garrisons, also contributed to the Corps professional growth. Property and supply accountability requirements brought about increased NCO involvement. The Army added duty positions such as ordnance and quartermaster Post NCOs (Fisch, 72). Time in service and time in NCO grade prerequisites for positions such as these motivated many soldiers/NCOs to reenlist in the Army as a more definitive career choice vice merely serving one or two tours as mere foot or "line" soldiers and in the process provided greater continuity to the profession of arms as we know it today.

The west's expansive area of operation with a competent opposing force operating within it, perhaps offers the most compelling contributing factors to NCO professional growth during this time period. The army's focus on the horse as an essential equipment component enlarged the scope of many NCOs' current leadership positions. Hands on supervision could mean the difference between life or death should any young enlisted trooper fail to keep his mount healthy. In addition, with fewer commissioned officers assigned to these garrisons, many of these NCOs were forced to play a larger role in leading patrol and combat missions (Fisch, 70). When you consider that the Indians were using combat tactics, techniques, and procedures not readily encountered before, by virtue of their position as leaders, many NCOs had to become on-the-hoof experts at irregular warfare (Fisch, 72).

Often, both combat leader and garrison NCO responsibilities and functions were directly linked. For example, irregular warfare placed a higher premium on marksmanship (Fisch, 72). This higher emphasis was due to the usually fast-paced and often ill-timed tempo or target of opportunity contact with the Indians. Many NCOs, understanding the necessity for the patrolling troopers to hit what they see under difficult conditions and at a moment's notice, undertook a greater role in the day-to-day training of basic rifle marksmanship in garrison (Urwin, 142). Such motivation and practical application of insight may indeed have laid the foundation for how we today as NCOs plan, prepare, and execute both training of our soldiers and how we lead them in times of conflict.

The American Indian Wars of the late 1800's presented the post-Civil War Army with several unique challenges and levied additional requirements and responsibilities on

a now lean combat force. The solution enacted to this multi-task dilemma had a profound impact on the professional development of the NCO Corps, notably their duty requirements and how they performed them. Today, it remains both visible and viable that the NCO Corps duties, responsibilities, and even some of the parameters of its authority were an offshoot from this now legendary heritage.

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